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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 RIYADH 001435

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SUBJECT: WHAT DOES "SAUDI SUPPORT FOR IRAQ" REALLY MEAN?

REF: A. DAMASCUS 726

B. RIYADH 1386

C. RIYADH 1408

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Classified By: Ambassador James B. Smith for reasons 1.4 (B) and (D)

SUMMARY

11. (C) Saudi Second Deputy PM Prince Nayif's recent call for Iraq's Arab neighbors to "stand together with Iraq" was a rare public statement expressing firm Saudi support. However, Nayif's statement notably failed to acknowledge any improvements in Iraq's security situation, which Foreign Minister Prince Saud Al-Faisal continues to cite as the chief impediment to an increased Saudi presence in Iraq. With respect to the upcoming Iraqi elections, the Saudis remain concerned about Iranian influence, but claim to be watching, waiting, and hoping that an acceptable cross-sectarian coalition will appear. Post contacts disagree as to whether the Saudis plan to try and influence the election outcome, but suggest they have grudgingly begun to accept the idea that a Shia-led Iraq is here to stay. END SUMMARY.

NAYIF TO IRAQ: WE'LL STAND BY YOU

12. (U) At the October 14 meeting of the Iraq Neighbors Interior Ministers in Sharm El-Sheikh, Prince Nayif urged Iraq's neighbors to "stand together with Iraq." He expressed hope that the meeting would "give the Iraqis a feeling that their neighbors are concerned," and described assisting Iraq as a "religious, moral, and humanitarian duty." In addition, Nayif described those who tried to destabilize Iraq as "Khawarij." His choice of this particular word-- used to describe those who fought against the fourth Caliph, Ali-- suggests that these individuals were no longer capable of being rehabilitated, and that fighting them was justified. Nayif's statements were featured prominently in the press, and represented a rare recent public statement expressing firm Saudi support for Iraq.

FM SAUD: STEADFAST SUPPORT DOESN'T INCLUDE BUNKER AMBASSADORS

13. (C) During his October 17 meeting with Ambassador Smith (ref B), FM Saud said that Nayif's "very frank" comments to the Iraq Neighbors Interior Ministers meeting reflected the Arab position that Iraq needed help. It should not feel "surrounded" nor should it be the source of infiltrators. Cooperation was needed to help Iraq secure its borders and prevent infiltrators from crossing into Saudi Arabia. The major impediment to returning a Saudi Ambassador to Iraq

remained the security situation, which had not improved. A Saudi Ambassador would be a target, and while "we are prepared to take calculated risks," Saud said a "bunker Ambassador" would not be able to function effectively. This sentiment was reaffirmed in an October 27 meeting between Abdulaziz bin Abdullah and Ambassador Smith.

¶4. (C) The upcoming Iraqi elections would help only if all parties were allowed to join, and there was no "mishandling" as occurred "last time." There ought to be an Arabic test for prospective voters, Saud suggested, since "huge numbers" of Iranians voted in the last elections. The Al-Maliki government was partly responsible for the present security problems, Saud continued, since it hadn't implemented its program. The government needed to assure the equality of all Iraqis, the integrity of Iraq, and equitable sharing of the country's wealth. Until this was done, the conflict could not be resolved.

SAUDIS AND SYRIANS IN STEP ON IRAQ...

¶5. (C) Earlier in the month, Turkish CDA Sadik Arslan told Poloff that Iraq had been one of the main topics of discussion during King Abdullah's recent trip to Damascus (ref A), and that it was "almost impossible to find differences" between the Saudi and Syrian stances on Iraq. The Saudis and Syrians had a "logical preference" for one another, he noted, in that they both supported the Sunnis and "detested Maliki." They could "cooperate to bait Maliki," he suspected, and perhaps try to influence the elections in indirect ways. A downside to Saudi-Syrian cooperation in Iraq, he cautioned, was that increased emphasis on Iraq's Arab identity and encouragement of Arab nationalist sentiment

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was likely to further alienate the Kurdish community.

...OR STILL MISSING THE BEAT?

¶6. (C) Egyptian First Secretary Mohamed Samir took issue with this rosy view of Saudi-Syrian agreement with respect to Iraq. "There were two issues on which the Saudis and Syrians did not totally agree (in Damascus)...Yemen and Iraq," he said. In both cases, deep Saudi suspicion of Iranian meddling and motives conflicted with Syria's unwillingness to abandon its strongest current regional ally. Rather than disagree openly, he suggested, the two countries issued separate (rather than joint) communiqués which enabled them to leave certain things unsaid.

¶7. (C) With respect to Nayif's remarks to the Meeting of Interior Minister's of Iraq's neighboring countries, Samir roundly dismissed suggestions of their significance. Nayif's participation in the meeting had been something of a surprise, he noted, and came about only after bilateral Saudi-Egyptian meetings were scheduled that coincided with the event. In his view, the remarks themselves were "typical, Arab nationalist" remarks, aimed directly at Iran. In fact, he found them somewhat disappointing-- unlike many of the other Ministers, Nayif did not directly address the Iraqi government or positively highlight its recent security achievements.

SAUDIS ON THE SIDELINES

¶8. (C) Commenting on recent news stories alleging the Saudis are actively attempting to undermine Al-Maliki's attempts to form a non-sectarian coalition, Samir was skeptical. "They (the Saudis) are no longer interested in backing elements they cannot control," he said. "They are watching and

waiting," he continued, hoping to see someone emerge that they could support. However, they did not feel compelled to back anyone, and he did not believe they had identified a candidate they were currently willing to support. "If they see someone they like, they might offer some indirect support, such as more favorable media coverage." They would not, however, ever warm up to Al-Maliki, even if his non-sectarian coalition came to pass.

BUT CHANGE MAY STILL BE IN THE AIR

¶9. (C) On a more positive note, Samir described the "subtle shift" he had observed in the Saudi mentality towards Iraq. The Saudis were grudgingly coming to terms with the inevitability of Shia majority rule, he suggested, and had begun to consider how best to mitigate Iranian influence in light of this reality. Their fear of Iranian influence-- and belief that Al-Maliki was an Iranian puppet-- remained strong, but they seemed increasingly amenable to working with a Shia-dominated Iraqi government provided it took an independent stance.

COMMENT

¶10. (C) FM Saud's comment about requiring an Arabic test for potential Iraqi voters is one more example of the extent to which the Saudi view of Iraq remains colored-- perhaps excessively-- by their distrust of Al-Maliki and fear of Iranian influence in Iraq. Our consistent response has been to encourage the Saudis that they needed to look beyond personalities and to their strategic interest in Iraq, and that a strong Saudi presence was essential to keeping Iraq firmly anchored in the Arab world. The possibility that the Saudis are grudgingly beginning to draw distinctions between "Shia-led" and "Iranian-dominated," as suggested by our Egyptian colleague, suggests this message is being heard.
END COMMENT.

SMITH